



Adaptive Horsemanship Participant and Care Provider Guidelines



Welcome to the Achieve Tahoe Adaptive Horsemanship Program! This guidebook serves as an introduction for participants, care providers, and family members to learn about the program. Please review carefully prior to attending the sessions. Feel free to reach out to Achieve Tahoe with any questions.

The goal of the Achieve Tahoe Adaptive Horsemanship is to provide individuals with disabilities an enriching environment to learn and interact with horses. Horses have been known for their healing energy for centuries, and research continues to show that equine interaction improves social and communication skills, optimizes quality of life and reduces stress, which are among a few of the benefits observed.

One of the most common questions when seeking equine-related interventions is what is the difference between hippotherapy and adaptive horsemanship?

While both hippotherapy and adaptive horsemanship involve using a horse, they vary in many ways.

HIPPOTHERAPY is the utilization of the horse's movements to achieve functional gains. Hippotherapy can only be practiced by a licensed clinician (physical, occupational or speech language pathologist) with the proper training, expertise, and knowledge. Insurance covers this service. Learn more at Americanhippotherapyassociation.org. This is not offered through Achieve Tahoe.

ADAPTIVE HORSEMANSHIP is the recreational activity for individuals with disabilities that involves both unmounted (off the horse) and mounted (on the horse). It is not a medical intervention; therefore insurance cannot cover this service. Riding instructors do not need a medical background but are strongly encouraged to be certified through the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Inc.). Achieve Tahoe is in the process of the instructor obtaining the certification. Learn more at Pathintl.org. This service is offered through Achieve Tahoe.

ADAPTIVE HORSEMANSHIP SESSIONS:

The sessions will range in duration from 30 to 60 minutes depending on the needs and goals of the participants. Scheduling and the appropriate class will be discussed during an evaluation or meeting with Achieve Tahoe staff. The sessions will be mounted or unmounted. The intent of these sessions is to connect to horses in pertinent and meaningful ways.

Mounted Activities: Finding Rhythm & Strength

The "Why" Behind the Fun: Research shows that a horse's walking gait moves the human pelvis in a three-dimensional pattern that almost perfectly mimics the human walk. While all participants benefit from these physical aspects, it is important to note the primary objective: **The goal of mounted adaptive horsemanship is to learn recreational horsemanship skills.** While therapeutic in nature, these sessions focus on riding skills rather than the medical or functional goals found in hippotherapy.

- **The "Navigation Challenge":** Steering through a colorful obstacle course of cones and poles. This builds **executive function** as participants must plan their route, look ahead, and use their body to communicate with the horse.
- **Sensory "Scavenger Hunts":** Reaching for rings on posts or tossing beanbags into baskets while moving. These games improve **hand-eye coordination** and **dynamic balance** while focusing on the fun of the game.
- **The "Mirror Walk":** Matching the horse's rhythm to feel when they stop or go. Studies indicate this promotes **emotional regulation**—as the horse slows down, the participant's heart rate and anxiety levels often follow suit.

Research Insight: According to studies highlighted by **PATH Intl.**, the primary benefit of adaptive riding is the development of **self-efficacy and autonomy**. Unlike clinical settings where a person is a "patient," here they are a "student" and "rider." This shift in identity leads to significant improvements in social communication and a sense of accomplishment.

Unmounted Activities: The Language of Connection

The "Why" Behind the Fun: Unmounted (ground) activities in the arena are where the deepest emotional bonds are formed. Horses are "mirrors"—they are highly sensitive to human heart rates and body language. Research in *Neurobiological Healing* confirms that simply being near a horse can lower cortisol (the stress hormone) and release oxytocin (the "bonding" hormone).

- **Grounding & "Equine Yoga":** Participants engage in mindfulness and stretching in the arena alongside the horse. This helps center the body and mind. By practicing deep breathing or gentle yoga poses, participants lower their own energy, which in turn signals to the horse that it is safe to relax.
- **Arena Engagement:** The arena is a focused learning environment. Activities include observing the horse's movement in space, feeling the texture of the arena footing, and listening to the rhythmic sounds of the horse's breath and footsteps. This **sensory immersion** helps participants become fully present.
- **The "Body Language Game":** Learning to "speak horse" by watching their ears, eyes, and tail while in the arena. This helps participants develop **non-verbal communication skills** and awareness of their own physical presence.
- **Leading & Teamwork:** Guiding a horse over a ground pole or through a pattern. Successfully "leading" a 1,000-pound animal builds an incredible sense of **autonomy and self-esteem**. It teaches that clear, calm communication leads to big results.

Research Insight: Qualitative research suggests that unmounted groundwork allows participants to practice "altercentric" skills—learning to think about how another being (the horse) feels—which is a core component of developing social empathy and emotional regulation.

We understand that it can be disappointing if a participant is unable to ride the horse. There are several benefits to interacting with horses while unmounted and Achieve Tahoe will ensure that every session (mounted or unmounted) is an enjoyable learning experience for all.

EVALUATIONS:

Evaluations will be completed for every individual interested in participating in the Adaptive Horsemanship program. This is done to identify the needs and appropriate activities per participant and allows time for parents and caregivers to ask questions. Evaluations for new participants will be 45 minutes and take place via Zoom. Evaluations for returning participants will be 15 minutes and take place via Zoom. The Achieve Tahoe Intake Sheet must be completed prior to the evaluation. Scheduling and available session dates will also be discussed during the evaluation.

Please make every effort to create a safe environment where the participants can be assessed virtually. For the participant's attire, form fitting clothing and supportive footwear is ideal.

ADAPTIVE HORSEMANSHIP SESSION ATTIRE:

It's important for the participants to wear the appropriate attire for safety. The list below outlines the requirements for attire.

APPROPRIATE ATTIRE:

1. Protective closed toe shoes: sneakers or boots
2. Canvas or durable pants or jeans that cover the ankles
3. Gloves and jackets for cooler temperatures
4. Lightweight short or long sleeve shirt
5. Layered clothing that can be added or removed

INAPPROPRIATE ATTIRE:

1. Play shoes that have openings (shoes must be fully closed around the entire foot and ankle with no holes or openings)
2. Shorts or capris
3. Clothing made of slippery materials such as silk or nylon
4. Pants with large pockets or long drawstrings

HELMETS:

Please make sure that there are no high ponytails, buns or clips on the top of the participant's head. This will make it challenging for helmet fitting. Also, nothing else can be under the helmet such as a bandana, headband or beanie. Achieve Tahoe will provide ASTM-FEI approved helmets that are dated within the past five years. If the participant prefers to use their own helmet, it must meet ASTM-FEI standards with no signs of breakage. The helmet needs to be appropriate for equestrian activities; bike and soft helmets will not be used. All helmets are inspected by the instructor prior to the session, who will determine the appropriateness of each one. If a privately owned helmet doesn't meet the requirements, the participants must wear one provided by Achieve Tahoe.

If a participant declines wearing a helmet in the arena or during the adaptive horsemanship session, the participant will not be able to partake in the session. The helmet policy at the Tahoe Donner Equestrian Center is that a helmet must be worn by every participant that is interacting with a horse. Lastly, a participant cannot be within 20 feet of a horse or in the same arena with a horse without a helmet on.

If a participant is over the age of 18, has no pre-existing condition that requires a helmet and able to make decisions independently, they have the option of not wearing a helmet for unmounted activities only and need to sign an additional waiver.

HORSE FACTS:

1. Horses have incredibly fast reflexes and react before thinking.
2. Horses can remember up to 80-90% of past experiences.
3. Horses are sensitive to touch, and their skin is as sensitive as human fingertips.
4. Horses can identify various emotions and mirror the energy humans provide them with.
5. Horses thrive on routines and socialization.
6. Horses have an acute sense of smell and hearing.

It's important to understand that horses are prey animals and rely heavily on instinct. Our horses are screened and trained for adaptive horsemanship activities, and the rules outlined below are implemented for the safety of the participants and program.

BARN ETIQUETTE AND SAFETY:

To ensure a safe and enriching experience, barn etiquette must be followed. If there are any safety concerns, the participant will be escorted by a volunteer(s) out of the arena back to the waiting area to a family member or caregiver.

To participate, the rules below must be followed.

1. No behaviors that can provoke flight responses in horses. If the behaviors are displayed during the session and unable to be redirected prior to interacting with the Achieve Tahoe team and horse, the individual cannot participate. This includes:
 - a. Running, biting, kicking, screaming and other aggressive behaviors
 - b. Climbing or sitting on the fences or railings.
 - c. Harsh or inappropriate language.
 - d. Not listening to the Achieve Tahoe staff
2. Must be able to follow 1-2 step instructions. This can be in the form of sign, verbal or other gestures and signals.
3. To ensure a productive session, additional questions can be answered after the session if time allows or set a time for a phone conversation. Given the schedule, it is our goal that the participant benefits as much as possible from equine interaction or activities.
4. Please arrive 10 minutes prior to the session to use the restroom and prepare for the session.
5. The Tahoe Donner Equestrian Center and Achieve Tahoe staff are not responsible for supervising the participant before or after the Adaptive Horsemanship sessions. Please monitor your loved ones closely and pick up the participant immediately after the session.

Arrival & Timing:

- **Prompt Arrival & Session Timing:** Please strive to arrive 10 minutes before your scheduled time. In accordance with the Professional Association of

Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.) **safety protocols** and our commitment to **equine welfare**, sessions cannot be extended or made up on the day if a participant is running late.

- **The "Why":** Our horses follow a strict work and rest schedule to prevent physical fatigue and mental burnout. Extending a session would cut into a horse's mandatory rest or preparation time for the next rider, which is a violation of the high standards of care we maintain for our equine partners.

If the participant arrives 10 minutes late for a 30-minute session, 15 minutes late for a 45-minute session or 20 minutes late to a 60-minute session, the participant will not be able to attend. If you are running late, please contact the instructor.

Barn Rules: Keeping it Safe & Fun!

To help prepare at home, you can review these rules together. They are designed to keep the environment predictable and the horses feeling safe.

1. Use Your "Barn Voice"

- **The Rule:** Keep voices low and calm. No shouting or screaming.
- **The Why:** Horses have very sensitive hearing. Loud noises can startle them, making them want to move away quickly.

2. Walking Feet Only

- **The Rule:** No running around the barn or the arena.
- **The Why:** Horses are prey animals with fast reflexes. If they see something move fast out of the corner of their eye, they might think it's a predator and try to run away (the "flight" response).

3. Ask Before You Pet

- **The Rule:** Always ask an instructor before touching a horse.
- **The Why:** Some horses have "sensitive spots," and we want to make sure you are approaching them in a way that makes them feel comfortable.

4. Stay in the "Safety Zone"

- **The Rule:** Stay at least 10 feet away from the back of a horse (the "kick zone") and keep your feet back from their hooves.
- **The Why:** Even the nicest horse might step back or swish their tail; keeping a little distance ensures your toes stay safe!

5. Listen to Your Team

- **The Rule:** Follow the team's directions right away.
- **The Why:** Your team, which includes the instructor, horse handler and side walkers are trained to work with horses and the goal is to keep you safe throughout the session.

Home Activity: "Red Light, Green Light" (Barn Edition)

You can practice these rules at home by playing a modified version of "Red Light, Green Light."

- **Green Light:** Walk calmly with "quiet hands."
- **Yellow Light:** Stop and use an "inside voice" to ask, "May I pet the horse?"
- **Red Light:** Freeze and take a "Grounding Breath" (deep breath in, slow breath out).

SESSION REMINDERS:

1. The Achieve Tahoe staff will greet the participants at the designated waiting area and escort them down to and from the arena. Family members and care providers are not allowed to enter the arena at any time. The participant must wait until it is time to be taken down to the arena with the Achieve Tahoe staff. We understand the excitement participants have, but for safety reasons, they must stay in the designated waiting area until it is time for their session.
2. If the participant needs sunblock or anything administered, please do it before the session
3. The participants are welcome to have a pack with food and snacks in a secure backpack
4. Make sure to review the weather and plan for attire accordingly
5. If the participant shows any signs of illness, they are not allowed to participate
6. Care providers and family members are required to stay within the designated waiting areas
7. Please do not attract attention during the session. There will be set times during the session to take videos and photos of participants. For privacy reasons, please only take photos or videos of your loved one.
8. No individual can be within 20 feet of the fences that connect to the arena. This can startle the therapy horse or a participant leading to a potential safety issue.
9. The only individuals that are allowed within the arena for adaptive horsemanship are the participants, volunteers and instructor. Family members and care providers cannot be in those areas.
10. If any medications need to be administered, the care provider or family member must do it before or after the session.
11. If there is an emergency situation, the instructor and Achieve Tahoe staff will determine the safest plan.

ADAPTIVE HORSEMANSHIP PROGRESSION:

The main goal of the program is for the participants to learn something meaningful and advance their skillset at every session. Every participant will be evaluated for goals and grouped with other participants of similar experience to guarantee a productive and fun session.

CONTRAINDICATIONS:

For medical safety reasons, individuals who present with any of the categories listed below are not permitted to partake in activities that involve riding a horse. For unmounted activities, please reach out to Achieve Tahoe for further guidance. Please update Achieve Tahoe with any recent medical changes or procedures.

1. Children under the age of five
2. Moderate to severe agitation with severe confusion, aggression or self-abusive behaviors
3. History of harming animals or starting fires
4. Open pressure sores or open wounds
5. Hemophilia
6. Hip subluxation or dislocation
7. Uncontrolled seizures within the last 12 months (seizures accompanied by uncontrollable motor activity)
8. Participants with Down Syndrome must have an exam for Neurologic symptoms of Atlantoaxial Instability
9. Lack of neck control
10. Acute juvenile kyphosis (Scheurman)
11. Structural scoliosis greater than 30 degrees or excessive kyphosis or lordosis, hemi-vertebrae
12. Acute herniated disk
13. Any recent surgery; this must be made known to the Achieve Tahoe staff
14. Moderate to severe osteoporosis
15. Medications or dosages of other substances that cause a physical state that is not conducive to being on a horse
16. Unstable spine
17. History of spinal or hip rods
18. Heterotropic ossification in the hip
19. Uncontrollable hypertension
20. Peripheral vascular disease
21. Spondylolisthesis
22. Serious heart condition
23. Indwelling catheter
24. Coxa Arthrosis (degeneration of the hip)
25. Hydrocephalus or cranial deficits if the helmet cannot provide complete protection
26. Uncontrolled diabetes or medically unstable conditions associated with diabetes
27. Tethered cord, Hydromyelia or development of Chiari 11 malformation symptoms associated with Spina Bifida
28. Allergies to horses, dust, hay or other environmental allergies that cannot be managed with medications

The maximum weight of a participant that a therapy horse can safely tolerate is 140 pounds for mounted sessions. The weight limit has been set by evaluating the therapy horses and incorporating the current research. The weight limit may change depending on any physical or medical changes that occur to the horse and will be addressed immediately. This is done to ensure the safety of the participants, horses, and volunteers. There is no weight limit for unmounted sessions.

WEATHER CONSIDERATIONS:

1. If there is a fire risk, air quality will be monitored closely
2. Sessions will not take place if it is below 35 degrees or above 85 degrees
3. If winds exceed 30 mph, mounted sessions will not take place

We look forward to seeing you at the barn!

*This document cannot be reproduced or modified without permission from Achieve
Tahoe.*